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## The Teaching of Poetry

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LIBRARY

*Have you practised so long to learn to read?*

*Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?*

MAR 22 1961

These lines of Whitman's suggest both the reason we teach pupils how to read poetry and the motivation that is probably most effective. For Whitman, the summit of intellectual achievement and satisfaction is symbolized in the understanding and enjoyment of a good poem. We teachers of English assume the responsibility of guiding the practice in reading which sometimes results in the ability to read poetry with enjoyment. We know with Whitman that the enjoyment of poetry is really the acme of the reading process. But we know, too, that few adults, even among the best educated and most literate, read poetry.

Poetry is one of the fine arts and shares with the others, painting and music, for instance, an intellectual challenge that only a relatively few care to confront. To read serious poetry with satisfaction requires not only a rather high degree of intelligence but also considerable concentration and the application of advanced techniques of reading. As with the enjoyment of music and art, the reading of poetry presupposes a rather extensive cultural background in which the mind of the reader moves quickly and easily. The poet, it is true, strives to communicate with his reader on an emotional as well as on an intellectual plane; and on the

Six practical hints on the teaching of poetry are given in this article. You will share with Dr. Willard of Southern Illinois University and past president (1954-55) of the Illinois Association, his enthusiasm for great poetry and his desire to teach it effectively.

emotional plane he is more readily and more generally appreciated. Unfortunately the language of our better poetry has proved too difficult for all but a few of the reading public.

If we accept this fact, that poetry is "caviar to the general," we must somehow justify teaching poetry to our high school pupils. We know in advance that no matter how well we teach, the great majority of them will never willingly read a serious poem in their later life. Of those who go to college, some few will become vitally interested in poetry, others will read assignments in required literature courses, but a surprisingly large percentage made up of those specializing in engineering and various sciences will not even be asked while in college to read a serious poem. Of those who do not attend college, we can hope that a few will continue to pursue an interest in good reading stimulated in the grades and high school. Some of these will become acquainted with the poets.

It is well to recognize that the results we can normally hope for are limited; but we still have the responsibility of teaching our pupils to read. Although they may never use the skills, our high school graduates should know how to read all kinds of writing, even poetry. But there are better reasons for teaching poetry, I think, than this obvious one. There is the immediate aim of present pleasure, enjoyment, and satisfaction. Through skillful teaching every child should be brought to the experience described by Whitman—the thrill of intellectual pride that comes with an understanding of a good or great poem. Each child has a right to the emotional and moral delight that a true poem correctly read can give. If the study of a number of poems during the high school years can produce this experience even once, the teaching of poetry seems justified. The child will have a new attitude toward poetry, and he will have at least this one experience with poetry which will always stand out in his memory as a high light of his intellectual life.

A few of our pupils we should be able to lead far on the road of enjoyment of poetry. All, I think, can be brought to some degree of realization of its meaning and power. At least we can hope to achieve some breaking down of the fear of the difficult in poetry. Our pupils should come to see that poetry does have much to say and that its form, far from being decorative only, is integrally necessary in achieving the poet's desired communication. The child must see that the concentration of poetry makes it more difficult to read than ordinary prose but that with proper reading a poem will give up its meaning. We can strive to develop his ability to attack the reading of a poem intelligently. And we can



hope to help him make a beginning in the appreciation of the peculiar worth of poetry, its intensity, its revelation of truth, its perfection as expression.

In achieving these ends, it is essential that we do nothing to destroy what little interest in poetry the pupils may have when they come to us. Whether or not pupils like the reading of prose during their high school years, they will perforce read it in their out-of-school life; interest may be re-awakened and developed. Pupils who learn to dislike poetry in school are little likely ever to return to it seriously.

Those of us who teach English have had various experiences and various successes in the teaching of poetry. We have all, I suppose, at one time or another helped to kill an interest in poetry; we have all on occasion been singularly successful in helping our pupils to enjoy a poem or group of poems. Different devices and methods have worked well for each of us in particular classes. I should like to present a few principles for the teaching of poetry in high school which in the light of my own teaching experience seem basic. The teacher of poetry should, I think, do the following:

1. *Select carefully the poetry to be read at each level.* It is perhaps unnecessary to note that there is no poem—indeed no piece of literature—that is essential for high school pupils. Poems must be found that will be suitable for particular classes at the appropriate time. No poem should be insisted upon for disciplinary reasons or because the teacher feels that it will be good for a particular class. This does not absolve the teacher from the responsibility of motivating a class so that they will willingly read a poem they would not themselves have chosen. But in such a situation the pupils must know why the poem is assigned and accept the reason as worth while. In other words, if the motivation fails, the poem should be dropped.

In selecting poetry, the teacher should remember that pupils rarely care for lyric poetry before late adolescence. In the grades and junior high school they are receptive to humorous and narrative verse. "The Highwayman," "Paul Revere's Ride," "The Wreck of the Hesperus," "The Skater of Ghost Lake," "Evangeline," "The Lady of the Lake," and the ballads are typical of the poems that seventh, eighth, and ninth graders really enjoy. We should not hesitate to use these poems even as late as the tenth grade if they have not previously been read. To us they may seem naïve and immature, but the children of these years love them and are capable of reading them with understanding, enjoyment, and profit. At the same time few if any teachers are able so

early to stimulate any enthusiasm for lyric or dramatic poetry. The teaching of Shakespeare, for instance, in the eighth and ninth grades can do more harm to the cause of poetry than it does good. Even in the tenth grade, most pupils though willing to make a beginning in Shakespeare find little in *Julius Caesar* or *The Merchant of Venice* to become excited about. As we all know, such a reaction is in sharp contrast to the enthusiasm with which seniors read *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet* or the first part of *Henry IV*.

By the time they reach the eleventh grade most pupils are ready for lyric verse. Up to now most lyric verse has seemed silly to them. Scan the anthologies and note how difficult a time the editors have had in finding suitable lyric verse for the earlier grades. Even what they include usually won't do. But in the junior year both boys and girls have reached a maturity in which they can read lyric verse with understanding and pleasure, although they are temporarily beyond an interest in narrative verse. They will read and enjoy many of the older poets in English and American literature and almost any of the modern poets. Selection is still necessary, but it must be made by the teacher on the spot who knows the interests and abilities of the particular class. Motivation, too, is always needed. The teacher must get the class ready to read the poem. If any poem is breeding dislike in the minds of the readers, it is better to let it go and try another. Pupils, of course, appreciate this realization on the part of the teacher of what they all know—that poetry is not like medicine which will probably do good even though it is unpleasant. Insistence on a disliked poem tends only to destroy what little interest a class may have in reading poetry.

2. *Provide excellent oral reading of poetry.* The teacher of English is an excellent oral reader. He can read poetry so that the pupils understand and enjoy it. Even though the pupils never grow to like poetry, they like a particular poem "because of the way you read it." Pupils never forget how Miss Bancroft or old Mr. Smith used to read "The Death of the Hired Man" or "Annabel Lee." In the teaching of poetry this is a duty that the teacher can not shirk. He must read poetry aloud to the class, and he must read it well. If he lacks the ability at present, he must take steps to develop it; for without it he will never succeed in getting boys and girls really to experience poetry.

Does this mean that all poems are to be read aloud by the teacher or that pupils are never to be allowed to read poetry to their classmates? Of course not. The teacher will know which poems can best be presented by his reading, and he should read



many. Pupils should, however, be given a chance to participate in the experience of oral interpretation of poetry. It helps them to understand a poem better, it adds to their enjoyment and appreciation of it, and it's fun. But when pupils are asked to read aloud, they must be given an opportunity to prepare—to look up pronunciations and meanings, to get help from the teacher, to practice at home. Spur-of-the-moment reading of poetry is too much to expect of high school students. Not only will the reader be embarrassed by the difficulties he encounters, but the audience will suffer. The child needs experience in impromptu reading, but poetry must not be used as the medium. Every effort must be made to insure effective reading whenever poetry is to be presented orally.

Recordings can be used to good effect if they are carefully chosen and used properly, but it must be remembered that a recording in itself is not necessarily good. Usually the teacher's reading is more successful; certainly it is more flexible and adaptable to a particular class or locality. Many of the recordings currently available, though fine in themselves, are of little if any use in the high school classroom. They must not be used merely because they are available and because the teacher likes them. Like the poetry they must be selected for their usefulness for a particular class at a particular time. Few teachers, for instance, will be able to make effective use of the Dylan Thomas readings of his own verse, interesting as these readings may be to the teachers themselves.

Teachers of reading and of speech frequently make the point that in teaching oral reading the audience must not have copies of what is read. This is not true of the reading of poetry in the English class. It is always desirable to provide the pupils with copies of the poetry being read by the teacher or by a pupil. With recordings, of course, the copy of the poem is essential. The point to be remembered is that the purpose here is not to train in oral reading but to help in the appreciation of poetry. The oral reading is an extra, very effective help to this appreciation.

3. *Stress the purpose and meaning of a poem.* Since young people rebel against the idea that a poem means different things to different people or that it provides only a vague emotional stimulation, some teachers make use of light or humorous verse in introducing poetry. This and narrative verse students have little difficulty understanding. The witty point is clear, the story is plain, the characterization is fairly obvious, and there's an end of the matter. The teacher wishes to take the child beyond this not very

difficult level, however. The dramatic and lyric verse that follows is more challenging, delving as it does into the springs of human action and revealing intricate and subtle depths of emotional reaction. When this more difficult verse is taken up, it is essential that the communication between the poet and the pupil reader actually takes place. The reader must find out precisely what the poet is saying. Too often the reaction to a poem is "Well, it's pretty. I like the sound of it, and the language is striking. I don't suppose it means anything much." People who react this way do not read poetry again until they have to. The first step in removing this attitude is to take a class through a poem finding with them the precise meaning and its implications, revealing to them that the poet does have a definite and a distinct purpose. "Cargoes," they will see, doesn't just say "something about ships" but makes us realize how vital the sea and sea traffic have been to every great civilization throughout history. Sonnet 116 of Shakespeare is seen to be not just another sentimental statement of the "I will love you when you're old" theme, but an exploration of the spiritual quality of true love, enduring and immutable because of its freedom from the limitations of the physical.

There are, of course, poems that seek an emotional response chiefly. These are the most difficult for the high school student to appreciate, and they may lead him to the idea that all lyric poems have the same purpose. He wants his poetry to have a precise meaning. If symbolist poetry is to be presented, the teacher must help the reader see that even in such poems the poet has a precise purpose. He aims at a definite effect; and, if his poem is successful, a competent reader will respond in the manner intended by the poet. If the high school reader is to enjoy poetry, he must realize that there is nothing fuzzy or vague about the purpose or meaning of a good poem. The poem is not only as precise as prose, but actually a better, more effective way of communicating what the author wishes to communicate, be it an idea or a feeling.

4. *Compare poem with poem or with another piece of literature.* It is good to train young readers to read a piece of literature by itself without reference to the author's life or other works. The reader should be able to take up a poem without knowing the author or the circumstances of composition and read it with understanding and enjoyment. Enjoyment and, sometimes, understanding are enhanced, however, when the reader is able to recognize in a poem a theme or a purpose attempted elsewhere by the same or a different author. Katherine Mansfield's short story, "Miss Brill," and Padraic Colum's "An Old Woman of the Road" thus augment



each other. Each leads the reader to sympathize with a class of people who are usually ignored. Each stresses the fact that these lonely, pathetic people exist, suffer quietly and bravely, and are neglected by society. It is easy for a high school reader to miss the point of either; yet, if he experiences the pathos of "Miss Brill," he will sympathize with the old woman—and vice versa.

"Kubla Khan" is frequently read as a meaningless dream fragment, remembered because of its metrical excellence and linguistic luxuriousness. When he reads it in conjunction with Shelley's "To a Skylark" and Poe's "Israfel," the high school pupil will recognize that all three of these poets are complaining that their reach exceeds their scope because of their human nature. They yearn to write the poetry they could write were they able to get free of the encumbrances of earth and flesh. If Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" is added to the group, a deeper melancholy is recognized in the theme.

Many such comparative readings can be made with profit in high school classes. One of the Sonnets from the Portuguese (Number XIV, perhaps) read with Stevenson's "My Wife" offers a readily appreciable lesson in evaluation, especially in developing sensitivity to the appropriateness of form and language to a given theme. Cummings's "somewhere i have never travel'd, gladly beyond" and Pound's "A Virginal" can be used for a similar purpose, and the pupils will quickly recognize the greater sincerity of the former. Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison" has to be read in conjunction with Satan's "The mind is its own place" speech from Book I of *Paradise Lost* (lines 242-263); the insistence on the necessity of intellectual freedom by these representatives of opposing factions helps the pupils not only to appreciate the poetry more but to understand better the temper of the age. Herrick's "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time" admits of many comparisons; it is sometimes useful to read it with MacLeish's "You, Andrew Marvell," perhaps with Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" added for good measure. And if Pound's "Sestina: Altaforte" be read, parts iv and v of his "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" should also be read to help pupils see the need of interpreting a poem from within rather than without.

One important value of such comparative reading is the stress it puts on the poem itself rather than on the poet or the conditions of writing. What interest the pupil does have is in learning how to read poetry with understanding and appreciation. He is not now and in most cases never will be concerned about the poets themselves. Even if he does not read poetry again, he may remember

with pleasure the reading of some poetry in school; he is not likely to remember with much pleasure the life of a poet or the background of a poem.

5. *Teach versification and poetic devices as means toward an end rather than ends in themselves.* With some classes relatively little can be done in the study of form in poetry. The pupils can be led to read some poetry with enjoyment and perhaps to develop a taste for future reading, but much attention to metrics or rhetorical names will destroy the interest. Occasionally, a class, a group, or an individual will want to learn the details of the structure of a line of verse. Some may wish this information as an aid in writing their own verse; others may want the information for its own sake. Both are, of course, good reasons for learning versification, and hence good reasons for teaching it. However, it is inconceivable that large numbers of our English pupils will ever want to learn metrics for any reason.

This does not mean that discussion of versification should be taboo in the literature class. On occasion, knowledge of a phase of metrics enhances the understanding or appreciation of a poem; the situation demands the discussion. The mechanics of versification are, incidentally, easily mastered; and, as with diagramming in the study of grammar, the pupils find them fun. They cannot remember the names very long, but they readily grasp the principles of rhythm and rhyme notation. The teacher must be careful to underplay these mere mechanics. If discussion of them hinders the enjoyment of a poem, ordinarily he should eschew such discussion. And he should be sure that the pupils do not transfer what interest they have to the structure of the verse.

The reader needs to know what poetry is. He will wish to be able to distinguish it from prose, and to do this he must have some knowledge of form. But basically poetry is determined by its intensity of thought and feeling, produced by careful selection of suggestive images and symbols and by the use of figurative language. The pupils must understand figurative language, its nature and its function; they must see that metaphor in its various forms is essential if poetry is to achieve its concision and suggestiveness. This, however, does not mean the isolation and listing of examples of metonymy, synecdoche, personification, and the other tropes. In the discussion of the form and language of poetry, the teacher need go only so far as a particular class wishes to go. Going farther is unlikely to do any good; it probably will do harm to any interest in poetry that has developed.



6. *Go through a poem fairly quickly, and finish with it while the class still likes it.* Once a child has understood a poem, he is ready to go on to another. In helping him to read the poem with understanding and appreciation, the teacher has fulfilled his goal. There should be time for enough discussion among the pupils to clarify the theme or mood and to point up the less obvious details of composition that enhance the significance or effectiveness of the poem. But use of artificial devices to prolong the study of the poem with protracted emphasis on the life of the poet, the background of the poem, or the beauty of the language frequently results in a loss of interest and a forgetting of the initial enjoyment.

For people mature enough to read poetry, the reading process is rather simple. A person reads the poem, thinks about it, re-reads it a few times, and perhaps compares his impressions with those of critics who have written about it. Only the critic or the college major in literature does more. If a teacher is concerned with developing a liking for poetry in his pupils, he will see that consideration of a poem is dropped when the pupils are finished with it. They must leave it while there is still some enthusiasm for it.

"The Ancient Mariner" is one of the most readily understood and enjoyed poems in the high school curriculum. Most pupils remember it as a high point of their early reading. Yet a callous teacher can persuade a class to hate it. An adult coming on the poem for the first time would read it in somewhat less than a half hour and be done with it for the time being. He would probably come back to it again later, but under no circumstances—unless he is a specialist—would he work on it for forty minutes a day for two or three weeks. A normal high school class can read this poem, understand it, discuss it, read some of it chorally, and enjoy it, in a matter of a few days. The teacher must recognize when the class is ready to move on.

*Evangeline* is another poem that pupils, especially eighth graders, enjoy reading. There was a time when *Evangeline* provided all the literature in an eighth grade for a semester. Now pupils read it in a week or two together with other Longfellow poems or similar narratives.

The shorter poem, too—Shakespearean sonnet, Keatsian ode, Browning monologue, or contemporary lyric—should be treated quickly. Though it may imply as much as many a novel, it must not take so long to read.

These, then, are the principles which seem to me to be essential to success in helping young people to enjoy poetry. Different

teachers employ different methods and devices in the actual teaching; but whatever techniques are used, these six principles can be observed in the presentation of poetry. The pupils, I think, will profit.

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## Choral Speaking

By ROSIA SPENCER AND MRS. BETTY BOEHM \*

### I. Background

What is choral speaking? It may be summed up as interpretative reading *en masse*. It is a group activity based on the same essentials as group singing—rhythm, cadence, tempo, pitch, and teamwork under the skillful and capable training of a group director.

Down through the ages people have read together in unison. Primitive man used choral speaking, in which the group said the same words at the same time and in the same rhythm for a number of purposes. The tribal chants could excite young fighting men to a readiness for warfare, and after battle other chants would celebrate victories or grief over the dead. The chants were accompanied by swaying and dancing. Sometimes the chants were taunts to outsiders or those within the tribe who did not conform to its customs.

The antiphonal chorus, a reading and response, was common among the Hebrews.

The Greeks first used the speaking choruses in the harvest celebrations to Dionysius, the god of wine.

Choral verse speaking, as a vocal activity, dates back to the Greek drama. The chorus was an essential part of the drama and was used to carry the plot forward. The Greek plays did not show violence on the stage, so the chorus was used to relate the gory happenings that befell the chief characters. The chorus was also used to express Greek philosophy, especially the nobility of a heroic acceptance of cruel fate.

Down through the ages, the Psalms have brought inspiration and courage to people everywhere, and the religious choral speaking

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of them is still practiced in the churches and synagogues. We find similar choral speaking in the early days of the Christian church. In this type of choral speaking two groups participate. One group responds to the other.

The troubadours of the Middle Ages roamed the countryside singing sad and gay songs. The people would respond heartily with the refrain to the troubadour's ballad.

Much of America's colorful history comes to us from unknown troubadours of the past. We find it in the sea chanties, in the group songs, and recitations of the pioneers fighting the wilderness and their own loneliness, and in the work rhythms of the brawny workers laying railroad tracks to link all parts of the continent.

Twentieth century writers have also been interested in writing for choral groups. Such writers as Thomas Hardy, who is noted for *The Dynasts*, T. S. Eliot in his *Murder in the Cathedral*, Stephen Vincent Benét in his *John Brown's Body* supply interesting samples of readable material for choral groups.

There are two main types of choral speaking. The first is the unison chorus, in which the entire chorus speaks as one voice, and which if it is properly prepared results in a harmonic blending of voices. In unison speaking each member of the chorus must keep within his own voice group—light, middle, or dark (or high, medium, and low). The higher pitched voices are called light. The medium pitched voices are called middle. The lower pitched voices are called dark. Light voices are used effectively to express poetic moods of lightness, cheerfulness, and delicacy. They also express exaltation and vivid and fiery qualities. The dark voices suggest heavier moods, such as concentration, gloom, or sorrow, also forcefulness and strength. The middle voices are usually used to suggest matter-of-fact, straight-forward and less dramatic ideas and moods.

The purpose of unison speaking is a colorful blending of voices and not a sameness of voices.

The divisional chorus is that in which two or more groups within a chorus are used at different times during the presentation of a poem. These divisions are used for contrast purposes and to emphasize or subordinate parts of a poem. The divisional chorus is effective in expressing definite changes or slight shadings in moods. Divisional choruses make use of alternate speaking, solos, speaking by small groups, and cumulative response. When a cumulative effect is desired, a very small group begins the poem and gradually other voices are added until everyone is speaking.

Some principal values to be gained from choral reading are improved speech, group co-operation, greater appreciation of poetry, extended sympathies and imaginations, and a better and broader social and historic understanding of poetry.

## II. Procedure

This is a good time to restore the almost-forgotten art of choral speaking because today our public is very speech conscious. All of our language authorities recognize the desire for oral satisfaction among the students in our classrooms, but they also realize that individual speech activities can consume too much of the class hour. If teachers of English were asked to state one main objective, they would probably agree upon the improvement of the four areas of communication: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Choral reading offers activity in three of these areas, speaking, reading, and listening. Choral reading can be used in the classroom to improve skill, understanding, and appreciation in the interpretation of literature, and it can be employed successfully as an art form for public performance. If choral reading is so valuable, why do so few teachers use it? Perhaps because very few English and speech teachers have had training or experience in the direction of choral speaking.

The choral speaking director must first spend some time in the selection of material to be used. Personal or subjective poems should be avoided. The love poems of Elizabeth Browning are suitable for individual interpretation, but they should not be used for group reading. Students and audiences also find abstract poems hard to understand and enjoy. These should be excluded from the program for beginning groups. Narrative selections are good for such groups. The student will accept the activity more readily if the director introduces poems that are rather easily understood, somewhat dramatic, and with marked rhythm and repetition. Most authorities agree that the best poems for group interpretation have a feeling of universality. Directors need also to consider the sound of the selections. Too many "s" sounds, for instance, can make a poem sound very unpleasant.

With amateur groups it is better to choose a variety of short selections instead of one very long selection. Contrary to the apparent aims of some directors, the speaking choir should neither include only serious selections nor always work toward perfection that is desired in public performances. As the group improves its understanding and skill, it should undertake the interpretation of more difficult material. Ballads, chants, and lullabies present the



least number of difficulties in interpretation while humorous verse and onomatopoetic poems are slightly more difficult. Next in the order of difficulty are lyrics, dramatic poetry, and selections from the Bible. High school students find prose, free verse, and blank verse very difficult for group interpretation.

After the director has chosen several suitable selections, she should be certain that she understands the poems and knows their backgrounds. Although she feels very familiar with the poems, she needs to practice reading them aloud several times, being very careful not to be over-dramatic. Possible arrangements should be decided upon for each selection. The content and structure of the selections may suggest the most effective type of arrangement. Philosophical poems are usually done in unison while poems containing two viewpoints, questions and answers (like *Lord Randal*) or ideas expressed and echoed usually use the antiphonal or two-group arrangement. Solo voices often take the direct quotations, narrative parts, or personalized expression. Some other interesting patterns include the sequential, cumulative, and echo arrangements. In the sequential arrangement each person takes a line and the entire group joins in on the refrain. Selections adapted to the cumulative type arrangement are opened by one voice or group and others are gradually added building up to a climax. The echo arrangement can be very effective in a large room where two or more groups can be stationed some distance from each other. Next the director needs to determine the varying pitch and tempo and decide on a key for marking the selections. Most speech and choral reading books suggest possible keys, or the director may establish her own. The pupils' awareness of the teacher's preparation gives them a feeling of confidence. It is best for the students and director to do their own interpreting of selections and not rely on choral reading books for selections that have been marked for choral interpretation.

The director of the speaking chorus should possess or develop certain qualities. She needs to have an understanding of rhythm, a consciousness of sound, and a feeling for artistic interpretation. A background of experience with literature and a real love for literature are necessary. Enthusiasm and imagination are desirable qualities for the teacher introducing choral speaking. Although it is a group activity, the director has specific responsibilities in addition to the preparation of the material. She must make decisions about techniques, criticize the blending of voices, and, above all, allow creative expression. Authorities in the field of choral speak-

ing disagree as to how much actual directing the teacher needs to do. Some say that she should speak with the choir, others believe she should always stand in front of the choir, and still others contend that during a performance she should be a member of the audience. During early rehearsals the group does need direction. The director may sit or stand in front of the group using one hand to direct tempo, pitch, and volume and the other to bring in the solos and groups. Student directors should be included as soon as possible. There is usually more audience appeal if the director is inconspicuous during the performance. The amount of direction and number of hand movements depend on the experience and size of the group and the difficulty of the selections. If there is no director, a conspicuous member should raise his head to begin and end the speaking.

If a speaking choir is to be chosen, the director should include students who have a similar appreciation of poetry, ability to read, and good speech habits. A speaking choir may consist of from eight to one hundred voices, although twenty is the preferred number for a beginning group. Some festival directors work successfully with several hundred. The group should always stand in a semi-circle of two or more rows with their shoulders touching. It is preferable to use risers for a public performance. Simple costumes may be used for public performances if they are appropriate to the theme of the selections and suggest unity. Music can be very effective if it is kept in the background and fits the mood of the selections. Sound effects, such as a shrill whistle, toll of a bell, or beat of a drum, may be used if kept to a minimum. Action can sometimes be incorporated effectively into a public performance. A pantomime or a dancing group might be appropriate action for some selections. Most directors prefer a plain background in staging a performance, and some use colored lights to create different moods. Although a minimum amount of staging is good, the group should always remember that choral speaking is an auditory activity, and they should allow nothing to change the poet's original meaning.

The teacher needs to remind the students of their responsibilities. They should strive to blend their voices, speak instead of sing the literature, and learn the terminology. They must be attentive and alert to fine distinctions.

If the director is enthusiastic and the selections have been carefully chosen, there should be little need for additional motivation. A relaxed atmosphere should be established for this type of activity. The teacher must be very patient and realize that progress in choral



reading takes time. The values and objectives of choral reading should be discussed with the students. Several recordings of choral readings are available and can be used to motivate interest. The way the director first reads the selection often causes the students to accept it or reject it.

The first thing that the teacher needs to do in the classroom procedure is to become acquainted with the voices. The most successful way to do this is to have two students read a verse together and allow the class to decide which is the darker and which is the lighter voice. If the voices have about the same quality, a third person is then asked to read with each. Imitation and artificiality should be avoided. After the voices have been tested, they are arranged into groups. A mixed group is often arranged into four groups, light and dark boys and light and dark girls. The size of the group, the heights of the students, and the placement of the solo voices will in part determine this arrangement. All members should have an opportunity to do solo work. As soon as the speakers have been arranged, the director reads the first poem, emphasizing the fact that her interpretation may not be the best.

The next step in the procedure is the most important. The director discusses the selection with the students. They talk about the rhythm and melody of the poem, the author's meaning and purpose, and their responsibility as interpreters for the author. Some of the students may be asked to scan a verse or plot the melody of certain lines on the board. They may discuss pitch, force, modulation, and inflection. The director may ask the students to find examples of metaphors, similes, and personification. Some selections may offer opportunities for discussion of assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. The meanings of individual words and phrases are interpreted. The selection is then read in unison. The director watches the students' response to the selection and encourages them to suggest other possible interpretations. If others are suggested, the group experiments with them and chooses the most effective one. They then continue with oral practice using student directors and working on memorization if the selection is to be memorized. The director should give suggestions for memorization and, as much as possible, keep it from becoming a chore.

Time must also be devoted to work on techniques and mechanics, although experience has shown that it is unwise to work for very long periods on a single selection. Many exercises for improvement of diction and articulation are available and should be used. Articulation in choral speaking should be neither slovenly nor over-precise. The group must work to develop a wide range of

force and variety in tempo and pitch. The director may encourage the students to listen by having one or two students at a time move away from the group. The blending of voices takes much practice. There are common weaknesses in all beginning groups. Breathing often causes trouble; the group should be encouraged to breathe as a unit. Timing likewise creates difficulty, especially for those who are temporarily silent; each student needs to be taught to be as conscious of timing when he is silent as when he is speaking. Other weaknesses include timid beginnings, skipping of final consonants, and poor nasal quality.

The most rewarding thing about choral speaking is that almost any group may learn to read a selection well. Students who cannot find places for themselves in dramatics, athletics, or musical activities gain much satisfaction from being a part of a choral reading group.